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ABSTRACT

A study investigated differences in the conversational interactions between a 4-year-old with severe mental retardation and his mother and teachers. Teacher-child and mother-child dyads were recorded over a period of a year, transcribed, and analyzed for adult acknowledgements of the child's efforts at speech. Eight categories of acknowledgement were considered, including: affirmations; expansions; interpretations; comments; queries; imitations; denials; and corrections. Results indicate variation in acknowledgement types and usage across sessions and across individuals, but generally fewer differences between teacher and mother behavior than anticipated. It is concluded that differences may be attributed to normal variation of interaction in any one session. Affirmations were the most commonly used acknowledgements, and interpretations were the second most frequently used. A 24-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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6. Acknowledging the conversational attempts of a young mentally handicapped child

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognised that mothers modify their speech when they talk to their young children. There is less agreement as to whether these modifications have a tutorial effect, albeit an incidental one. (See, for example, papers in Snow and Ferguson 1977, Fletcher and Garman 1979.) Newport, Gleitman and Gleitman (1977) document a number of features in the mother's language which they claim have a direct correlation with enhanced language development. They found for example that the growth of auxiliaries in children was positively correlated with the mothers' use of yes/no questions like Can you sing? However, demonstrating a correlation between two events is not the same as demonstrating causality, and a further sophisticated argument against Newport et al's claims for the advanced development of the verb phrase has been made by Fletcher (1983). Bruner (1983) states that mothers intuitively teach the pragmatic aspects of language rather than the syntactic and semantic aspects, and Barnes, Gutfreund, Satterly and Wells (1983) consider that modifications in adult language to children owe more to the adults' efforts to gain and hold attention than to their teaching strategies. The adults' contribution is seen as the scaffolding whereby the child's immature contributions are held within the conversational framework.

One potential way of investigating the links (if any) between input and output is to look at the input which language-disordered or language-delayed children receive. Mental handicap provides one such context of language delay. Studies to determine whether maternal language to mentally handicapped (MH) children differs from that directed to developmentally normal (DN) children have concluded that the differences are few, provided control groups are matched on linguistic rather than age criteria (Marshall, Hegrenes and Goldstein 1973; Buium, Rynders and Turnure 1974; Rondal 1977; Jones 1977;O'Kelly-Collard 1978; Mitchell 1980). Although the linguistic environment supplied by the mother differs in only limited ways for the MH child, there is one way in which his environment differs which to date has not been considered. The MH child is likely to be spending a significant proportion of his week in school when he is still at a very primitive level of language development: hence it may be appropriate to consider other adults

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who are spending a significant amount of time with the child. Most DN children, if not at their mothers' knees at this stage, are at least at the knees of a domestic care-giver, whereas many MH children are in school.

However, many MH children have grossly delayed language and a large amount of non-maternal (i.e. teacher) expertise and resources is spent on endeavours to ecourage and enhance language development. Intervention is almost exclusively through adult spoken input, so the structure and content of that non-maternal input is an important area of study. Teachers and other professionals involved with the education of these children are very aware of the importance of language development (witness the rapid spread of the Derbyshire Language Scheme), and they consider their input to be important. Furthermore, advice is given to parents as to how they might best use their language input to enhance their own child's development. Whereas the teacher of the DN child usually considers that the child has completed the bulk of his language learning, the teacher of the MH child cannot fail to be aware that language development is of prime importance in the school curriculum.

One of the distinguishing features of adult-child discourse in remedial situations, is the frequent use of acknowledgement (Crystal 1979), which is thought to reinforce the child's contribution. Clezy (1979) advocates the observation and subsequent training of parents in the use of acknowledgement. Other writers suggest that this might be a useful teaching device which can be incorporated in conversations and play sessions with children with language delay (Moerk 1974, 1976; Lasky and Klopp 1982; Ochs Keenan, Schieffelin and Platt 1983; Mowrer 1985). Martin, McConkey and Martin (1984) in an intervention study, focussed their advice to parents in the experimental group on modelling language, but the parents were also told to respond to the children's utterances and to expand them as appropriate. Ochs Keenan notes the need for acknowledgements in child centred dialogue and describes discourse where it occurs as 'happy talk exchange'.

When considering how the findings contained in the child-language literature relate to language delay, it is, I feel, premature to give parents categorical advice as to how they can help their child develop language: the evidence is not yet available as to which structures, if any, are helpful, when they should be used, and how often they should be used. However, the more we learn about language structure and use, the better we are able to initiate programmes to test hypotheses, programmes in which both professionals and parents can participate. As part of our preliminary knowledge, we need to have a descriptive framework and some base-line measures. For example, do both teachers and parents use acknowledgements? Do teachers use one type more than mothers? The expansion of the child's efforts has been mentioned as a

possible candidate for intervention and enhancement programmes, but is there any evidence that teachers use this device, and if so is teacher-use more frequent than mother-use?

The data presented in this paper is taken from a large study and focusses on a restricted area of interest. I want to consider how adults, teachers and a mother interacted with a young severely MH child, and in particular how they used their language to reinforce and acknowledge the child's primitive yet vigorous efforts to communicate.

THE STUDY

The adults in the study were the teachers and mother of a Down's syndrome child (IQ|50) aged 4;6. Both the teachers and the mother agreed the child had a number of single words. The child, who was the youngest of five children attended a school for learning-disordered children five mornings a week. Dyads were individually video-recorded as they played, the teacher-child dyads in the classroom and the mother-child dyad in the home. None of the adults knew the exact purpose of the study (although they have subsequently been informed and have given permission for the data to be used). The recordings, each of thirty minutes, were made at three month intervals over a twelve month period, giving a total of four hours. After six months, the class teacher changed, so that the first and second sessions are with teacher A and the third and fourth sessions with teacher B. There was a set framework for each session: for the first fifteen minutes the adult chose the game or work activity, and during the second half the adult was given a box containing a set of toys which she could use as appropriate. All the adults had wide experience, two in teaching and the other in mothering.

ANALYSIS

The adult speech was transcribed orthographically; the child's speech was transcribed using a broad phonetic transcription. Main prosodic features were marked and non-verbal contributions and contextual notes recorded. The adults' speech was analysed for structure and function. In this paper I am concerned with one aspect of the functional analysis.

All adult utterances that followed and related to the previous child utterance were coded as ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. These were then coded according to their function. The eight categories used were as follows:

AFFIRMATIONS are utterances which accept or affirm the child's contribution but do not add any new elements, e.g. <u>yes</u>; <u>ok</u>; <u>that's right</u>.

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EXPANSIONS include the child's utterances and add new syntactic or semantic elements, e.g. child: guitar. adult: it's a guitar.

INTERPRETATIONS verbalise the child's non-verbal communications or paraphrase the child's utterance, e.g. child: (signs 'plane'. adult: plane.

COMMENTS are noncommittal remarks, e.g. on, I see, uh huh.

QUERIES demonstrate that the adult has noticed the child's contribution but is unsure of it, e.g. adult: running along are you?

IMITATIONS are the adult's reiterations of the child's utterances, allowance being made for the adult's attempt to reproduce the child's form of the word.

DENIALS deny or negate the child's utterance, e.g. no, that's not right.

CORRECTIONS are utterances which reject the child's utterance but offer an alternative, e.g. adult: show me his ears.
child: (shows eyes)
adult: that's his eyes.

Totals were obtained for each category of utterance for each session, and, in addition, overall totals for the mother's sessions and the teachers' sessions were calculated. Comparisons were made between mother input and teacher input and the consistency of the input was considered.

RESULTS

The total number of acknowledgements used by the mother and teachers is shown in Table One. It can be seen that there are variations from session to session both for the teachers and for the mother, both sets of figures showing a similar degree of inconsistency. The percentage of mother's utterances that were classed as acknowledgements ranges from 18.32 in the fourth session to 38.21 in the third session. For the teachers, the range is narrower, from 20.85 in the third session, to 26.99 in the first session. Neither teacher seems to differ greatly in acknowledgements from the other. Acknowledgements accounted for 24.29% of the mother's utterances, and 24.68% of the teachers'.

The types of acknowledgements used are shown in Tables Two and Three. Again it can be seen that there is variation across the sessions although preferences for the type of acknowledgement show more consistency: for both mother and teachers the most frequently

TABLE ONE

Total acknowledgements used by mother and teachers.

SESSION	1	2	3	4	TOTAL
Mother					
a: acknowledgements:	114	102	60	94	370
b: utterances:	450	403	157	513	1523
ratio a/b:	.253	.253	.382	.183	.243
Teachers					
a: acknowledgements:	98	125	93	132	448
b: utterances:	363	478	446	528	1815
ratio a/b:	.269	.261	.208	.250	.246

TABLE TWO

Acknowledgement types used by mother.

SESSION	1	2	3	4	TOTAL	%
AFFIRMATION	45	36	13	24	118	31.89
INTERPRETATION	22	23	7	19	71	19.81
QUERY	6	12	16	22	56	15.13
COMMENT	18	8	12	15	53	14.32
IMITATION	7	11	4	6	28	7.50
DENIAL	8	6	3	5	22	4.05
EXPANSION	5	5	4	1	15	5.94
CORRECTION	3	1	1	2	7	1.89

TABLE THREE

Acknowledgement types used by the teachers.

SESSION	1	2	3	4	TOTAL	%
AFFIRMATION	36	46	27	48	157	35.00
INTERPRETATION	25	11	21	31	88	19.64
QUERY	6	43	15	15	79	17.63
COMMENT	6	9	12	26	53	11.83
IMITATION	15	6	5	6	32	7.14
DENIAL	4	5	6	3	18	4.01
EXPANSION	3	3	4	3	13	2.90
CORRECTION	3	2	3	0	8	1.78

used category is AFFIRMATION and the least used category is CORRECTION.

Statistical analysis showed that the differences between the sessions were significant for both the mother and the teachers. (For the mother $X^2=36.75$ with 24df, $p=.05$; for the teachers $X^2=73.5$ with 24df; $p=.001$). There is no significant difference between the total number of acknowledgement types used by the mother and the teachers. A significant difference was recorded between the two teachers, i.e. between sessions 1-2 and 3-4. The same difference was also found in the mother.

DISCUSSION

Although the results show that there are differences between individual sessions, they also show that over time the input from the mother might be much more like the input from teachers than was previously thought. A few inconsistencies can be seen in Table One. The number of acknowledgements used by the mother is low in session three, as also is the total number of utterances. (It later emerged that the mother had consciously reduced her input during this session so as to assist me in recording the child's speech.) The data show no overall trend in number of acknowledgements used.

The results also show that there are some small differences between the way the mother and the teachers talk to the child. These inconsistencies are small, however, and the most likely explanation is that they merely reflect the normal variations of interaction that arise in any one session. The similarities in the data are much more striking than the differences. It would seem then, that teachers' and mothers' use of acknowledgements is actually very similar. Ranking the choice of acknowledgement type shows this very clearly. Apart from the categories of EXPANSION and DENIAL, both mother and teachers have identical rank orderings. Both mother and teachers use AFFIRMATIONS in about one third of cases, and the next highest category, INTERPRETATION, accounts for about twenty percent of the data. These patterns are broadly in line with the pattern of results reported in other studies, though the percentage of some acknowledgments produced by the teachers is rather low compared to other work. Wells (1979) for example, found that six percent of the total utterance types produced by adults in interactions with children were expansions, and Letts (1985) reports a speech therapist using three percent of expansions while treating a mentally handicapped child, while a session with a language disordered child yielded six percent of expansions. It may be that these differences are ascribable to the needs of the particular children.

This analysis has looked at only one aspect of the conversational

interaction that occurred in these different dyads. The data are clearly analysable in a number of different ways, but on the dimension studied here, at least, there seems to be a large measure of similarity between teacher usage and mother usage. If this type of feedback is beneficial to the child, then this child is getting good tuition from two sources, and advice to parents about 'good' interaction, looks as though it might be unnecessary.

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